INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE ON THE VISUALIZATION OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: FILMS ON HEREDITARY SINGERS IN ETHIOPIA

AUTHOR(S):

KAWASE, Itsushi

CITATION:

KAWASE, Itsushi. INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE ON THE VISUALIZATION OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: FILMS ON HEREDITARY SINGERS IN ETHIOPIA. African study monographs. Supplementary issue 2010, 41: 101-109

ISSUE DATE:

2010-03

URL:

https://doi.org/10.14989/108280

INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE ON THE VISUALIZATION OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE: FILMS ON HEREDITARY SINGERS IN ETHIOPIA

Itsushi KAWASE
Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University

ABSTRACT This paper explores the constructive dialogue between an anthropologist/filmmaker and the audience on the visualization of knowledge through anthropological films. The dominant discourse in visual anthropology has paid insufficient attention to the general viewer's role in the construction of meanings and evaluation of ethnographic inquiry. This paper examines how viewers from different cultural/screening contexts interpret and respond to my works on musicians and children in Ethiopia. It also seeks ways to project the active voice of the audience in regard to the development of existing ideas on how local knowledge is best conveyed via visual media. I consider cases from academic film festivals in Europe, screening seminars among Ethiopian immigrants in North America, discussions via blogs and university lectures in Japan. The paper focuses on the role of the audience in the formation and rediscovery of cultural identity with regard to local knowledge presented via filmic documentation, and explores the appropriate manner of film-presentation in the form of montage and screenings, on the basis of my experience using films as an educational medium.

Key Words: Visual anthropology; Reception of films; Intercultural dialogue; Azmari; Lalibala.

BACKGROUND

Films can be powerful means of communication in many instances, especially in regard to the immediate exchange of ideas not only in limited scholarly circles, but also among wider audiences. However, the dominant discourse in visual anthropology has paid insufficient attention to the viewer's (including the people who are the subjects of the film) role in the construction of meanings and the evaluation of ethnographic inquiry (Dienderen, 2008; Omori, 1988). This paper examines how viewers from different cultural/screening contexts interpret and respond to my works on hereditary singers in Ethiopia. It also seeks ways to project the active voice of the audience in regard to the development of existing ideas on how local knowledge is best conveyed via visual media. The paper focuses on the role of the audience in the formation and rediscovery of cultural identity with regard to local knowledge presented via filmic documentation. Furthermore, it explores the appropriate manner of film-presentation both in the form of montage and screenings on the basis of my experience in using films as an educational medium.

UNESCO's project for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage in Ethiopia has paid considerable attention to traditional Ethiopian music, dance, and instruments. Many researchers including ethnomusicologists, linguists, and anthropologists have been involved in this project to study and understand the present con-

ditions of these Ethiopian traditions and their bearers. However, researchers are increasingly aware of the fact that collecting and analyzing printed transcriptions and translations only provide a faint idea of cultural properties and their social functions, and hence, there remains a need for new forms of documentation and research. With respect to traditional musical performances, audio-visual means, in particular, can be effective in describing the interactions between performers, the audience and the researcher; choreographies, costumes and props; context and politics of the performance, etc.

FILMS ON THE AZMARI AND LALIBALA

The main subjects of my films are the two different types of hereditary singers that make up the musical culture in northern Ethiopia—Azmari and Lalibala (Lalibaloch in plural). These singers have been integral figures in their social organizations for years, but still face challenges posed by the changing musical environment. Azmari are known for playing one-stringed fiddles called masenqo (see Fig. 1). They have flourished in hierarchical societies or in places where a feudal system of government coexisted with a powerful aristocracy (Kebede, 1971: 169). They have played multiple roles in Ethiopian history (Kimberlin, 2003; Powne, 1968) as news forecasters, social critics, companion clowns, commentators, religious observers, political agitators, strollers, poets, servants, musicians and beggars. Azmari performances are popular forms of entertainment, often part of

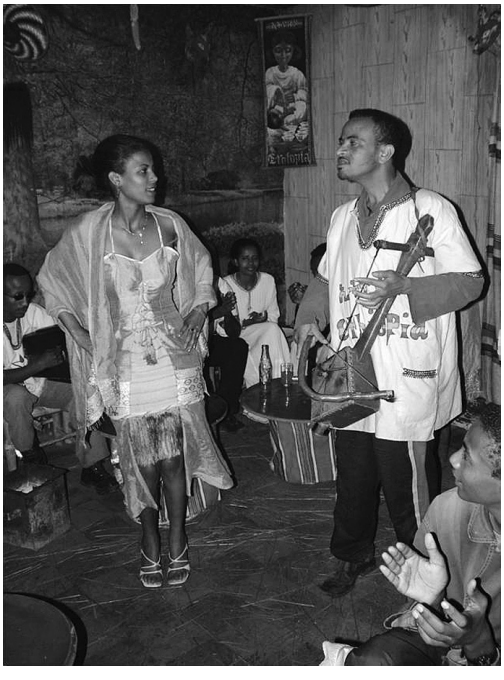

Fig. 1. A couple of Azmari singing. Addis Ababa, 2004.

religious celebrations such as baptisms, weddings and annual celebrations of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of the Amhara people, who are the dominant population in northern Ethiopia.

Lalibala are a group of singers in Ethiopia who are believed to share certain oral traditions that condemn them and their descendants to leprosy unless they sing, beg, and bless for alms every morning. Once Lalibala receive alms in the form of money, clothes, and food, they sing particular verses that are forms of blessings, wishing prosperity and reminding people of the vanity of wealth, absence of absolute, etc. They occasionally attend religious services and banquets held for the commemoration of the deceased, where they sing about the deceased for the family and are paid in the form of a cow's leg (see Fig. 2).

The film *Lalibaloch: Living in the Endless Blessing* (2005) attempts to describe in detail the interaction between the Lalibala couple annually visiting Gondar and the audience. Specifically, the opening of the film, which contains an uncut 7-min sequence, shows the viewer the details of the conversation and interaction. It proves that the complex interaction between the performers and audience is reflected in their songs and performance. This film also tries to capture the daily cycle of this couple.

Through the making of the film *Kids Got a Song to Sing* between 2001 and 2004, I captured a picture of Azmari children from the perspective of youngsters

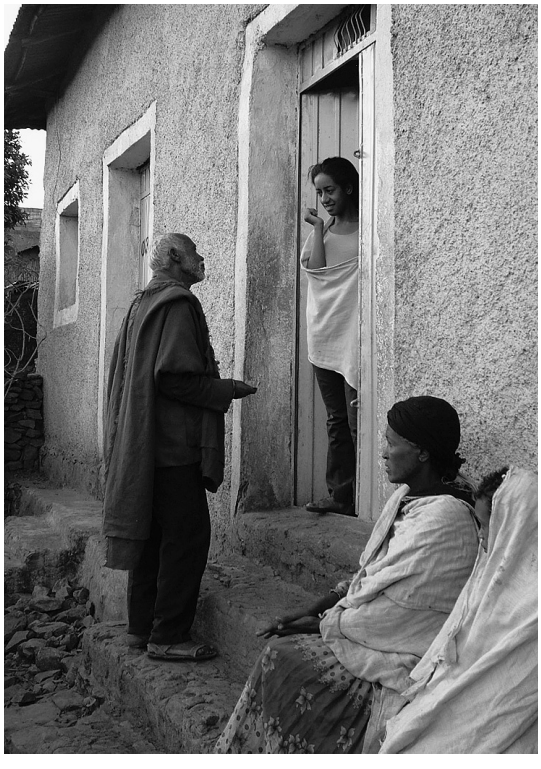

Fig. 2. A male Lalibala begging in front of a door. Gondar, 2004.

aged 9–14 (in the year 2001). I began following the characters chronologically, with a video camera, to represent how communities maintain, renew, and pass on their knowledge of musical skills and oral literature. I communicated and occasionally argued with the people in front of the camera as well as during feedback screenings. I also tried to capture the intimate dialogues between us because these people involved me in their activities so deeply that I was, in some instances, an integral part of their daily lives.

My footage, thus, deals closely with the filmmaker's personal testimony as well as the interaction between the filmmaker and subjects. While editing, I set up some conceptual keys to visually describe the episodic rhythm of the subjects' daily lives and knowledge construction through film. These included the development of musical skills, economic survival strategies for their musical activities, territorial disputes with adults, social interactions with other groups, and so on.

SINGERS' FEEDBACK

During their stay in Gondar in 2004, feedback screening sessions for the Lalibala family were held continuously after their morning activities at the local inn. I showed them the footage of their activities by means of an attached video monitor in order to take account of their reactions. This yielded an unexpected result and helped loosen the tension between the singers and myself. They were not used to being filmed and thus did not fully understand what I was working on with the video camera. It made them feel less alarmed of my participant observation and filming. Moreover, it consequently brought to my research the interesting insights of their performance when they started telling me about new dimensions of their work that I would have otherwise not noticed. The most important point was that they made me aware of their secret code of communication. The information related with their business transactions, for example, was frequently exchanged in between Amharic song texts. I learned that the great majority of vocabularies from their argot are deformations of Amharic words. The Lalibala couple taught me some of the patterns they use to make their argots such as substitution of a radical, reduplication of the root, metathesis and augmentation of the root. The feedback screening among the Lalibaloch consequently helped me get close to the group.

On the other hand, the feedback screening for the five Azmari children who appeared in *Kids Got a Song to Sing* resulted in more intensive dialogues on cultural representation. Feedback screenings were held for the five Azmari children including Yitayal, the main protagonist of the *Kids Got a Song to Sing*, in Addis Ababa (see Fig. 3).

Yitayal, at that time, moved to Addis Ababa from Gondar for a short period in order to participate in the screening and discussion of the film that was held in Addis Ababa University and Alliance Ethio-Française. The feedback screening was first held on my laptop computer; after the screening, I hoped to discuss the film with the children to try to gauge their feeling/reaction. Because the complete version of the film was shot 3–4 years before they saw it, they saw the film with

Fig. 3. Feedback screening and discussion with Yitayal, the main protagonist of the film *Kids Got a Song to Sing*. Addis Ababa, 2007.

amusement and nostalgia, but frequently got embarrassed by their own jokes and the clothing they wore at the time. Moreover, they were uncomfortable seeing themselves openly communicating with me using the secret code of communication.

Jacobs-Huey (2002) argues in her article about the danger of disclosing cultural secrets or airing what community members (research informants) consider "dirty laundry" stating that these revelations might make it difficult for the revealers to return home. Yitayal was slightly afraid of what the other Azmari might think of his actions, and wondered if he would be blamed for the disclosure of such intimate information in the film. At any rate, the discussion reached the conclusion that the film should not only focus on the life of Azmari wandering all over to seek opportunities to sing in Gondar, which they regard as their countryside. Children said the film should include sequences that capture them with nice "traditional" clothes singing for *bahirmishit* (nightclubs). Working for a nightclub is considered desirable as it brings stable payments. However, none of the children have sung in nightclubs so their comment can be considered to be a reflection of their desirable self-image rather than a reality.

VARIOUS REACTIONS TO FILMS

Both works have been screened on numerous occasions both inside and outside Japan. The films have been screened in the 6th Ethiopian Music Festival held in Alliance Ethio-Française and Visual Anthropology Symposium "*Japanische Blicke auf Asien und Afrika*" (Asia/Africa through Japanese Eyes) at Hamburg University. *Lalibaloch: Living in the Endless Blessing* has been screened in the 10th Berlin Ethno Film Fest at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin as well as in the 16th

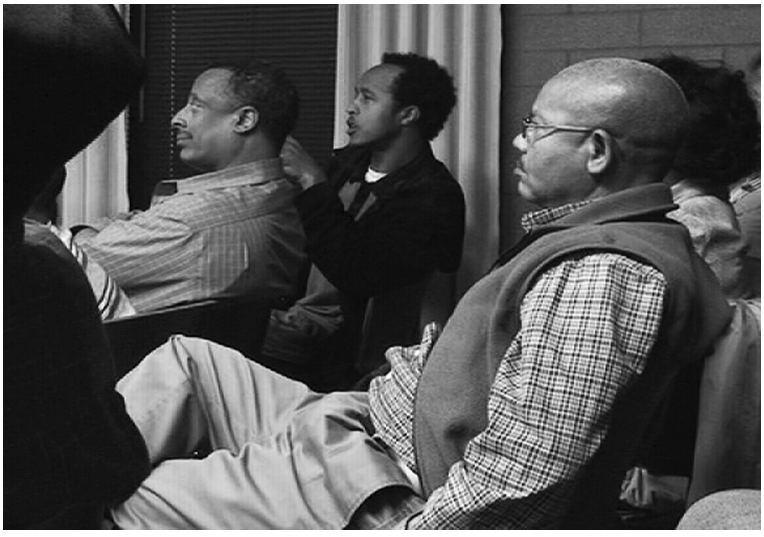

Fig. 4. Ethiopian diaspora attending the screening in Skyway Library. Seattle, 2008.

International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Film Panel, Norwegian University of Science and Technology and the 50th Conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology at Emory University.

The films have also been screened in North America in the seminars organized by Ethiopian diasporas and argued widely in weblogs among them. I also had chances to continue these discussions via email with many members of the Ethiopian diaspora who have watched my films in the USA. Debates centering on the cultural identity of and cultural consciousness among Ethiopians in the USA have been ongoing in several weblogs after the intensive screenings of both the films in the USA during 2007–2009. Venues include the Gondar Mutual Association and Skyway Library in Seattle, Portland Community College, Corvallis-Gondar Sister City Association in Oregon, and others. In particular, the discussion (both in the screening room and debates on the weblogs) was rather enthusiastic after I showed the films to approximately 70 people in Café Busboys and Poets near U Street in North West Washington DC, which is known for being home to a large number of Ethiopians (see Fig. 4). During these screenings, a senior Ethiopian Radio personality appeared and insisted that the filmmaker (I) should include some popular imagery including pictures of the Fasiledes Castle and historical churches if the filmmaker is creating a film on the people in Gondar. A group of students responded to this stating that since my films primarily deal with personal stories, such cultural symbols are not necessary. In fact, arguments on how the "Ethiopian culture should be presented" frequently appear whenever my films are viewed, particularly, when they are viewed by Ethiopian officers, scholars, and diasporas.

On a couple of screenings, the criticism for *Lalibaloch: Living in the Endless Blessing* was considerably severe. The film was labeled as a "strong projection of poverty" during the meeting on inventorying of the intangible cultural heritage

of Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia hosted by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and UNESCO Addis Ababa Office in October 2006. I was also told that some officers of the Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritage (ARCCH) were particularly irritated by the film. Later, I tried explaining to the officers of ARCCH, who attended the screening, the intention of my film. I found that the people from ARCCH consider the subject of the film, Lalibala, too provocative because for them, Lalibala resonated with beggars and not singers, and thus, were inappropriate to be the subjects of a film.

The film also met with harsh criticism when it was screened at the Ethio-Study seminar at Sankofa in Washington DC in September 2007. The majority of the attendees (approximately 20 people) were Ethio-American university students and filmmakers. In this seminar, the organizer (a university professor and prominent film director) told me that what I captured was a "circus" since the people in Gondar seemed to be disturbed by the presence of the camera on the street. He suggested that I should have taken the Lalibala couple to a stage or any other less-intrusive place rather than film them on the street as this would have helped capture their lyrical talents and poetries much more carefully sans any interruptions from the people passing by. In response, I pointed out that I was trying to capture the performers' creativity, by specifically centering on their interactions with the audience. The film treats their performance in the course of the ever-changing song-making process.

The events in the UNESCO screening can be attributed to the selection of the film subject in the context of an international organization whereas the events in Washington DC can be attributed to the differences with regard to cinematic fantasy between me and the organizer of the event.

SCREENINGS IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

These films also became the subjects of an educational brochure and were used in lectures and seminars related to Ethiopian/African Studies and Visual Anthropology in Hamburg University, Cologne University, Harvard University, Addis Ababa University, Osaka University, Kyoto University and Tama Art University, among others. In Japan, the films have been widely used in anthropology-related courses in universities. Certainly, it is necessary for students to not only grasp what is expressed in the visual images but also develop an eye (Ushijima, 1988) for discovering things from the films and forming their own judgments. In April 2007, I had a chance to show *Lalibaloch* to the students who were taking a visual communication class in Komazawa Women's University, where I was a temporary lecturer. The aim was to learn the theory and practice of anthropological filmmaking. I showed my works in the beginning of the semester arguing that the filmmaking methodology used in each work, including mine, must be explored. Before the screening of *Lalibaloch*, the background of musical culture and hereditary singers in northern Ethiopia was explained using photos and related short video clips. In spite of the explanation, out of the 23 viewers in the lecture, 8 showed apparently negative feelings towards the singers in the written descriptions

of their impressions about the film. Some of the negative opinions are as follows:

[Student 1]: "I dislike the way Lalibala couples sing in a compulsive way."
[Student 2]: "They are like highly enthusiastic sales personnel and are annoying."
[Student 3]: "They sing in front of people's houses very early in the morning to obtain money. This is annoying and I cannot understand this custom."
[Student 4]: "Their forceful attitude is discomforting."
[Student 5]: "I think they are miserable."
[Student 6]: "They appear to be poor people judging from the way they dress and what they sing."

These student reactions illustrate confusion and disgust towards the way the Lalibala sing, and perhaps may be attributed to their lack of a more diversified cultural understanding. Thus, the careful contextualization of the performance of Lalibala into the Ethiopian cultural settings can be considered as essential to avoid providing misleading information. However, at the same time, these reactions may have been caused by physiological factors that surface when one encounters something culturally unfamiliar. As I presented my own films on Ethiopia to those students who have never been there, I thought it might be necessary not only to provide detailed background information related to the film's subjects but also to create conceptual keys to approach the film to incite the viewer's creative imagination. I began providing research questions and/or points of arguments when presenting both films in university lectures. In fact, in the screenings held in my classes in Kobe college (to 75 students in May 2009) and Miyagi Gakuin Women's University (to 16 students in August 2009), questions such as "What music means to these singers in Ethiopia?" and "How do you compare your music-making environment with that of these Ethiopian singers?," were asked. As a consequence, discussions went well and students' reactions were much more positive in terms of relativising (rethinking) one's own music making context.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

These reactions to the films show the fluid aspect of the mediated relation between the author and the viewer. We find that the interpretation of the film continues to change and that a "final result," hence, in a way, does not exist, given that different viewers are present in different screening occasions. The interaction between the author and the viewer continues to renovate, presenting different and unexpected perceptions depending on the context of the screening. Films are akin to living entities—once out of the author's hand, they can speak their own words in a different screening context. We filmmakers should reconcile ourselves to this property of the medium and try to find a way to follow-up the discussion post-screening with a wider public audience. It is necessary to

sophisticate the way in which we document the political and sensual nature of film receptions. Furthermore, we should strive to develop a methodology for using films produced by researchers as applied tools for educational resources inside and outside the academic context. Developing methodology is certainly a great and pertinent challenge for visual anthropology today. Finally, it must be noted that a film as an academic product is not only received and argued in scholarly circles—for example ethnographic film festivals—but also in a wider public audience.

REFERENCES

Ashenafi Kebede 1970. *The Music of Ethiopia: Its Development and Cultural Setting*. Ph.D. dissertation, Wesleyan University. University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor.

Dienderen, A.V. 2008. *Film Process as a Site of Critique-Ethnographic Research into the Mediated Interactions during (Documentary) Film Productions*. VDM Verlag. Dr. Müller, Saarbrücken.

Jacobs-Huey, L. 2002. The Natives are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice and Accountability among "Native" Anthropologists. *American Anthropologist*, 104: 791-804.

Kimberlin, C.T. 2003. Azmari. In (S. Uhlig, ed.) *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica,* 1: 419-421. Harrassiwitz Verlag, Wiesbaden.

Omori, Y. 1988. Basic Problems in Developing Film Ethnography. In (P. Hockings & Y. Omori, eds.) *Cinematographic Theory and New Dimensions in Ethnographic Film*. pp. 191-204. National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka.

Powne, M. 1968. *Ethiopian Music, an Introduction: A Survey of Ecclesiastical and Secular Ethiopian Music and Instruments*. Oxford University Press, London.

Ushijima, I. 1988. The Situation of Visual Anthropology in Japanese Universities. In (P. Hockings & Y. Omori, eds.) *Cinematographic Theory and New Dimensions in Ethnographic Film*. pp. 191-204. National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka.

FILMOGRAPHY

Lalibaloch: Living in the Endless Blessing. 2005. Itsushi Kawase. Japan. 25 minutes (Amharic with English subtitles).

Kids Got a Song to Sing. 2005. Itsushi Kawase. Japan. 37minutes (Amharic and Azmari with English subtitles).

——— Accepted *November 30, 2009*

Author's Name and Address: Itsushi KAWASE, *Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, 46 Shimoadachi-cho, Yoshida, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, JAPAN*.

E-mail: kawase@jambo.africa.kyoto-u.ac.jp